



Bonsai Therapy

Four teacher share their experiences with using bonsai to cure psychiatric patients.

Translation by Joe Grande

*“Everybody needs beauty
as well as bread,
places to play in and pray in,
where nature may
heal and give strength
to body and soul.”*

—J. Muir

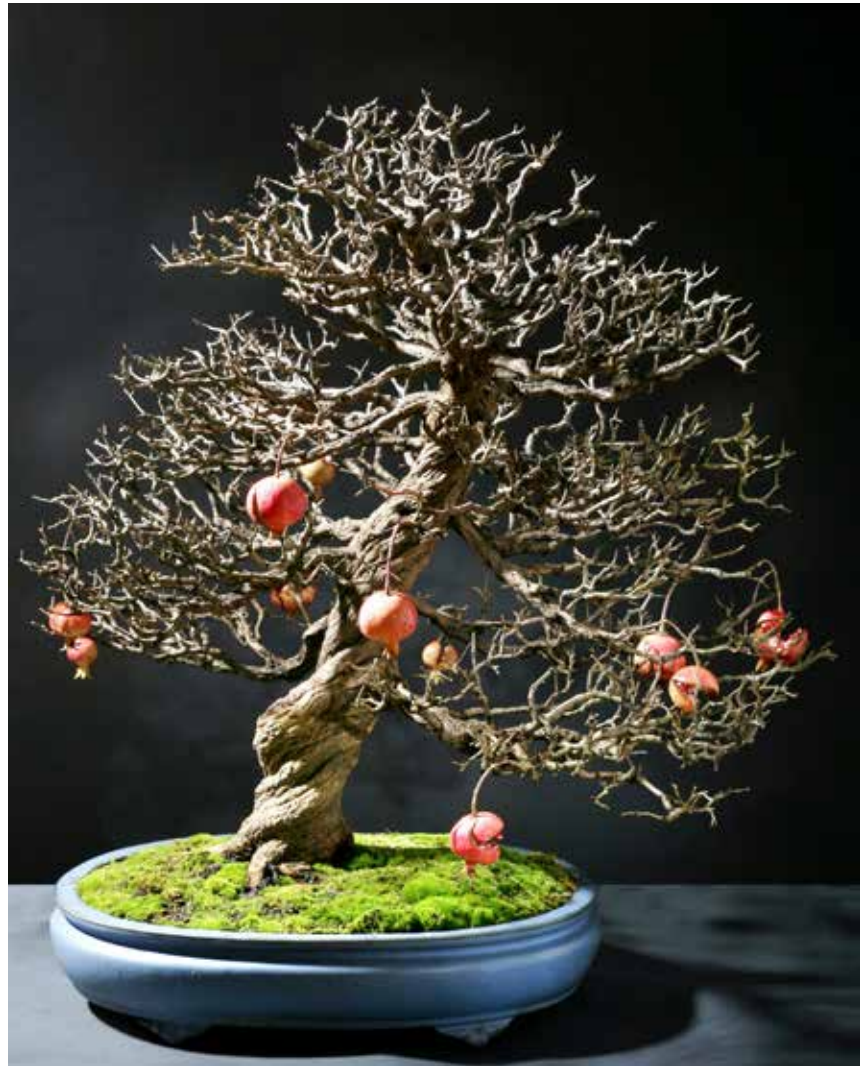
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Supervision; Massimo Bandera

I can speak with great enthusiasm of Bonsai Therapy, a new bonsai frontier that exploits the healing potential of the art of bonsai. We talk about cultivation techniques, culture and aesthetics, but today we will also discuss the curative effects of bonsai for psychiatric patients.

My experience with the Hospitaller Order Fatebenefratelli has been a great success, and now I have received public funding to expand the program. This is an important step for the future of a program with high social value.

In these pages I present studies of four teachers who are specializing in Bonsai Therapy with me.

—Massimo Bandera



Curing with bonsai

— Irene Sturari

We all know and have experienced the benefits of a walk in the woods or in a park when you are very stressed and tired. The mere sight of trees and colors, savoring the fragrances of flowers and herbs can raise morale and distance us from the negative elements of everyday life. With this in mind, we understand the therapeutic and rehabilitation that an active and healthy relationship with nature can stimulate.

Bonsai Therapy is designed and proposed for improving the health of the patients from a social point of view as well as the mind and body.

As with the animals in the pet therapy, Bonsai Therapy also involves living material. Confidence in the patients' ability to create, is discovered or regained. To keep alive, care for and grow a living entity through a method of work created and discussed both individually and collectively, can achieve the objectives identified in time through the gradual transformation and realization of the bonsai itself.

This provides new motivation and new ideas to people affected by psychiatric illness, by physical stress, mental, intellectual and social factors that reflect a lifestyle rather than therapeutic intervention.

Analyzing the experience more closely, it is noted that all the professionals involved in the project use a common approach aimed at stimulation, the creation and growth not only of the practical potential of the individual, but also self-esteem and sense of belonging to a collective and being active within a synergistic group.

Regarding the educational and rehabilitation aspect, the professional educator, takes all measures put in place during the group context so that adjustments can be made for individuals and to collectively to expand, consolidate and reinforce the lessons in everyday life.

The main areas of intervention that are developed during the Bonsai Therapy course are as follows:

Cognitive. To properly carry out the theoretical phase, in preparation for the practical phase, we solicit the potential and/or attentive, analytical, deductive, mnemonic, comprehension, concentration, listening and dialogue skills. All core elements for learning the lessons from the bonsai master.

Physical. In this experience uni-bilateral movements with the bonsai are covered, not only in theory, but also by hand-eye coordination, the measure of their strength and postural balance. Multi-sensory stimuli are also used that relate to the visual aspect of the bonsai (appearance and ability to see and read what the bonsai is communicating), touch (caring with their own hands), hearing (listening to the theoretical phase) and taste (learning about oriental tea culture and tasting tea).

Behavioral. We want to counteract the experience of isolation and worthlessness frequent in people with psychiatric disorder, and at the same time reduce the daily and repetitive stereotyped behaviors induced by the illness itself by tapping into their sense of caring, generosity, responsibility, patience, tolerance, respect for rules of nature, for oneself and for the group.

Emotional. Emotions, a rich source of personal and intimate information, are the determining factor and central for human conduct. The formation of a regular group that over time becomes a safe and empathetic environment where they can express themselves freely, is very important. There are many reactions that contribute to the patients' experience, for example observing the aesthetic and sculptural expression of the bonsai, putting to practice the invasive and aggressive styling process for plant growth, experimenting with the oriental ambience and many other situations. Living through these experiences allows everyone to interact in a personal and inner way through the rediscovery, interpretation, expression and processing in a group atmosphere.



The objectives of Bonsai Therapy

— Luigino Bardini

The main objectives of Bonsai Therapy are:

- Develop psychomotor, postural and coordination dynamics;
- Activate all the sensory system but also balance, sensitivity, external and internal perceptions;
- Contain intense emotional responses and repetitive and involuntary behavior;
- Increase the emotional involvement towards the self (self-empowerment, self-esteem, self-satisfaction) and others (respect, generosity, gratitude, compliance, trust and kindness);
- Increase cognitive potential (understanding, analysis, deduction, problem solving).

Bonsai Therapy is characterized as a social and affective/emotional experience that generates significant moments, controlled by the therapist's non judgmental listening style. This help the subject find a useful space for self-recognition, to keep active the process of growth and integrate its elements; instinct, imagination, change, conscious but always vital and creative.

Humankind has lived in close contact with nature from the very beginning of its existence and has learned much from observing it. Nature is a valuable asset for the humanity and the entire ecosystem. Taking care of plants means taking care of themselves. You can perceive a therapeutic dimension that is equivalent to the human-plant relation; constant dedication, continuous and prolonged care giving, gratification, satisfaction, well-being.

Here are some assumptions on the philosophical concept and a hypothetical theoretical framework of bonsai therapy. Bonsai Therapy can be proposed as a means of self support through which you can develop a sense of

identity and you can achieve a higher sensitivity and knowledge which lead to overall personal growth. Our research aims to explore techniques and methods for structuring an intervention with patients with mental health problems and people with disabilities for therapeutic purposes. The bonsai therapist must know how to style and cultivate bonsai and must possess psychological knowledge relating to patients in a reassuring, friendly and knowledgeable way. Therapists also must be able to make a plan of action for individuals or groups, for gradually introducing patients in educational and experiential courses aimed at knowing every phase of the cultivation and care of bonsai.

One of the goals of bonsai therapy is to integrate the philosophy of bonsai and with the psychological and psychoanalytical theories with special attention to the ways that make this discipline adaptable to users with mental health problems: children, adolescents, adults and the elderly.

Pedagogy through bonsai

—Manuela Balma Tivola

The term pedagogy indicates the discipline that studies theories, methods and issues in educating people.

The main function of a pedagogical intervention is to give back freedom to the patients in our care.

The educator's task is to guide the subject, as he or she finds a personal way, helping them understand valid reasons to make beneficial changes. This process must be carried out with the utmost respect for the wishes of the student.

Bonsai Therapy is a rehabilitation treatment that can help restore well-being in a holistic way to its practitioners; a well-being that affects all participants in the session. In addition, the bonsai therapist experiences an enriching spiritual, emotional, psychological and pedagogical relationship with these novices.



It is a treatment that complements, enhances and supports the traditional therapies and can be used on patients with various diseases with the aim of improving behavioral, physical, cognitive, psychosocial and psycho-emotional functions.

Bonsai Therapy is not a therapy in itself, but a co-therapy that can be used with an educational rehabilitation therapy. The purpose of this kind of therapy is to engage the subject in an emotional, cognitive, behavioral, relational and physical manner.

The opportunity to work with a bonsai plant, in many cases, makes it possible to develop an emotional relationship, to establish a channel of communication and to encourage the active participation of the subject during the therapy session.

The act of taking care of a plant develops a sense of responsibility, of affection and overcoming emotional states such as shyness or hyperactivity. The "Bonsai-Therapy" is normally carried out in groups, encouraging social interaction, made easier by the fact that it takes place in a non-medical but highly professional setting, which in itself fosters and welcomes moments of expressive freedom and sharing.

It also promotes relationships, often complex, within the group as collaborative exchanges occur and as they review the steps taken and the results obtained.

In working with a plant that is a living subject in all respects, you can see in their motivation to look after another life form, as they care for their bonsai, the will to take to heart their own life by implementing choices that can lead to their own well-being.

The act of giving shape and style to a bonsai can be interpreted as a desire to give a new form to their own way of living and interacting in society, cutting ties that do not give emotional richness and increasing, with loving care, those who nourish us with wellness and balance.

The ability to create and then care for a plant, reconciles people to the importance of nature, which has rhythms different from those of humans. This can teach us to be more patient, to have respect for those who are slower than us. Also nature teaches us to learn to wait and anticipate the developments of our beloved bonsai.

The concept of "knowing how to wait" is very important in education, more so in these times characterized by speed and fluid social relations, where, often, people are marginalized by society.

Taking care of a bonsai can be a valuable tool for rehabilitating people suffering from hardship and social exclusion, as the act itself develops a sense of responsibility, which may be applied to their lives.

Bonsai as an educational and rehabilitative cure

— Francesco Balbo

This project began two years ago with the guests from the psychiatric community and was gradually structured in the rehabilitation communities, with some typical educational connotations.

To start this discussion, I introduce questions posed by guests: Is the bonsai process educational? In what sense is it rehabilitation for the individual? Is there a relationship between personal growth and the growth of the plant?

The verb educate (from Latin *ex-ducere*) means to take a person by the hand and help them to discover the life that surrounds us, in a process of research, discovery and acceptance of a greater and universal reality. Rehabilitation (from Italian *re-skill-active*) is the activity that helps people rediscover their own abilities and skills, to retake it in hand and reuse them in relation to others. Considering these meanings, we understand how the rehabilita-



tion is one of the educational dimensions of personal growth, maturity, and healing.

Regarding the relationship between the person and the plant, it is interesting to recall that in ancient iconography plants resemble people in their essential traits; roots-feet, trunk-torso, branches-arms, both grow in depth and size and need care. Other dimensions, interpreted metaphorically, contributed to their similarity such as pruning, harvesting the fruit, beauty, growth, harmony.

Together with members of the community we have collected some thoughts on the educational and rehabilitative aspects of bonsai:

On space: the word bonsai, meaning "tree in a tray" is the act of potting a plant in a small space that in the ground can grow very large. This helps the person to bring nature to him or her, to feel closer (less distant geographically), more familiar (less alien in its characteristics), plus it becomes part of their lives (less physically detached). The work of caring for a plant in a confined space allows you to recreate a natural microcosm with which to relate, within reach and more proportionate to the individual's characteristics and their lifestyle.

On time: the growth of a bonsai is very slow because of the small pot. This natural slow rhythm meets the faster rhythm of a person's life. Bonsai plant care helps to change pace, to reconsider the way we experiencing time in our lives, to get used to the slow changes in plants, waiting longer to claim the rewards. Those who stay with the process of training bonsai live more natural and human rhythms, notice small changes and have faith in the slow growth of life.

On cultivating: the verb grow (from the Latin *cultus*) describes an ancient manual human activity, which unfolds much like the characteristics of a religious cult: with calm, meditation, repetition, internal reflection. The activity of cultivation is to take care of the plant, establish-

ing it an emotional relationship of love, passion, concern, closeness, interest, responsibility and respect.

On the body: the care of bonsai sets in motion various aspects of embodiment of the person: the mind to understand how to operate, the heart for love and care, an eye for the aesthetic taste, hands to direct contact with the plant, feet for research and discovery of new and creative bonsai. The hands, in particular, touch the earth, the plant is potted, the bonsai is styled, the branches are wired, roots and twigs are pruned, the bonsai is fertilized and watered: over time, this physical contact with the plant communicates energy, vitality, love and harmony.

On smallness: natural flora, next to the great work of creation, the smallness of bonsai has a very special place, bringing with it the characteristics of beauty, harmony, strength, tenderness, affection, natural force. In popular culture the miniature plants evoke values of familiarity, friendship, peace, and simplicity. The smallness of bonsai can also be interpreted as an image of the smallness of our inner person, understood as the spirit of childhood, simplicity of life, purity of heart, careful listening. The growth of the plant or person connected with the smallness retain a wisdom of life, an inner feeling unique in the world. 🌳

